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ABSTRACT

The need to examine college student attrition as an approach to the expected demographic decline in the 1980s, and case studies that demonstrate retention improvement and successful techniques are considered. Information is presented on the progress of typical freshmen (graduates, transfers, and dropouts) and patterns of interrupting studies. Institutional responses to attrition include counseling programs, improvement of academic advising, special orientation activities, and exit interviews. It is suggested that although tracking the progress of students from entry to degree completion is still applicable to many students, many students are interrupting their studies or combining them with employment or leisure pursuits. Institutional studies of retention rates can serve as important tools in developing an enrollment strategy. Successful retention tactics include the following: thoughtful initial placements of freshmen roommates through the use of student preference questionnaires and leniency in permitting roommate changes; a program to encourage students who are considering leaving temporarily to develop a structured leave of absence, combining their immediate goal with possibly receiving academic credit for an independent off-campus project; early involvement in campus activities during the freshman year; cooperative education programs; easy access to and clear descriptions of sources of financial aid; honors classes for the top 10 percent of the freshman class; analysis of attrition rates by departmental level; and marketing tactics. Case studies of retention studies are described, and resource persons are listed. (SW)

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AMERICAN COUNCIL ON EDUCATION Policy Brief

Janet P. Jackley, Research Assistant • Cathy Henderson, Research Associate December 1979

RETENTION
Tactic for the Eighties

In the continual search for students to fill classroom seats and dormitories, college administrators too often overlook an obvious pool: those students who are already enrolled in their institutions. Retaining students until they graduate will not only help maintain the quality of the student body, but also will save institutional, state, and federal investments. A large state university calculated that the institution's 41 percent attrition rate over five years implied an annual loss of tuition revenues approaching $10 million.[1] Because institutions can no longer depend on an increasing college-age population in the 1980s to relieve such a tremendous financial loss, the need to examine the attrition phenomenon becomes urgent.

Who Will Leave? The magnitude of the attrition phenomenon is often overlooked. Only four out of ten entering freshmen are likely to receive a bachelor's degree from the same institution within four years (see charts). Although additional students may transfer or eventually finish, three out of ten will probably never obtain a baccalaureate.

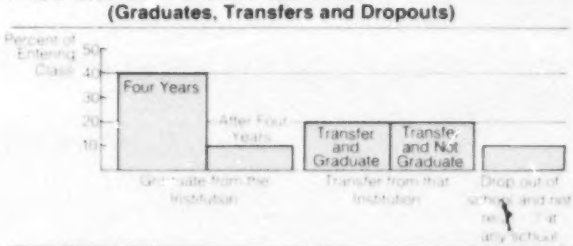
Over a period of four years, higher proportions of women than men persist in college, but more men on the average eventually complete degrees. When academic factors are held constant, there are no significant differences by race or ethnicity at the national level. Chicanos attending open admissions programs in the West do, however, have substantially higher dropout rates than other students.[2]

First-generation college students and students with poor academic achievement records are the most prone to leaving.

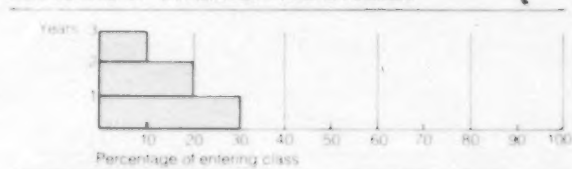
Reasons for Leaving It is important to remember that in many cases, leaving college, either temporarily or permanently, is the proper choice for some students. Health problems or family responsibilities may demand the student's immediate attention, or educational goals may be met before the completion of a degree.

Among students who *do* interrupt their studies, financial problems are consistently reported as a major reason for leaving. This response is more socially acceptable than many others and often masks a more complicated set of circumstances, such as poor academic preparation, incorrect choice of institution, inadequate advisement, or poor quality of teaching.

PROGRESS OF TYPICAL FRESHMAN
(Graduates, Transfers and Dropouts)



PATTERNS OF INTERRUPTING STUDIES



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Institutional Responses to Attrition Rates Philip Beal recently completed a national survey for ACT-NCHEMS in which sixteen hundred institutions were asked to identify efforts taken to reduce attrition rates.[3] Beal found that the most common institutional responses to attrition were counseling programs. The improvement of academic advising, special orientation activities, and exit interviews were also widely reported.

Many institutions target their efforts to improve the retention of low achievers, transfers, or other special subgroups. Other institutional programs are more general and are designed for students who face common academic problems, such as the declaration of a major during the sophomore year.

Three Case Studies Case studies can provide interesting examples of successful retention experiments. Planners at large campuses can often implement within individual departments programs developed in smaller settings.

1. Spring Arbor College created a retention strategy based on the assumption that a student's decision to withdraw is affected by the attitudes of peers.[4] Consequently, the college set out to expand the opportunities for interaction with other students and college personnel. Students began participating on student recruitment teams, in expanded intramural and intercollegiate programs, and in more field service projects.
2. In 1976 Edward Anderson, Director of the Academic Achievement Program at UCLA, implemented a retention strategy focusing on minority and nontraditional freshmen.[5] Anderson found that the common concerns among minority freshmen were insufficient funds, below average academic skills, unstable educational and career plans, and difficulty adjusting to college life. To address these problems, Anderson designed three student services: a personal counseling center, a career and graduate school counseling unit, and tutorial services. Furthermore, since students often do not initiate contact with counseling units, the program personnel monitored student performance and progress "to detect fluctuations which might be symptomatic of problems requiring attention."
3. Low enrollments, low graduation rates, and high unemployment rates for minorities in Broward County, Florida, stimulated Broward Community College to construct a youth employment program for disadvantaged high school graduates and college students.[6] Together with the Broward Manpower Council, the college established career-related jobs for students under the aegis of college personnel and local agencies. This project provided college students with one term of tuition-free education subsidized by the college and related work experience subsidized by the Manpower Council. Broward Community College offered individualized academic, career, and personal counseling to each participant, as well as workshops focused on resume writing and interview techniques.

Summary Increasing retention rates will help allay the expected demographic decline in the 1980s. By installing a monitoring system to survey current students, administrators can begin to collect timely data on the incidence and causes of attrition. Longitudinal analysis provides a clearer view of the multiple factors that influence persistence and helps to distinguish among the dropouts, stopouts, persisters, and transfers. Size of the institution may dictate the particular focus of retention programs but will certainly not eliminate the potential of such a project. Establishing retention programs takes time and effort on the part of each member of the college community, time and energy worth expending to maintain the overall health of the institution.

Next Steps The American Council on Education's Division of Policy Analysis and Research is scheduled to hold a series of conferences on student recruitment and retention in 1980. Further research and analysis of data by the Policy Analysis Service is contingent on external funding. Institutions are encouraged to share information about retention programs, successful as well as unsuccessful, with the Policy Analysis staff.

Notes

1. Carol L. Everett and Jacquelyn Stirn, "Academic and Social Integration of Students: Why Do They Stay or Leave?" (Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Association for the Study of Higher Education, Washington, D.C., April 1979).

2. For a detailed study see Michael A. Olivas, *The Dilemma of Access: Minorities in Two-Year Colleges* (Washington, D.C.: Howard University Press, 1979).

3. Philip E. Beal and Lee Noel, "What Works in Student Retention: Summary of a National Survey Conducted Jointly by American College Testing Program and National Center for Higher Education Management Systems" (Paper presented at the Research and Analysis Seminar, Policy Analysis Service, American Council on Education, August 6, 1979. A more complete report, published jointly by ACT and NCHEMS, is available as a monograph, published under the same title [Iowa City, Ia.: ACT, and Boulder, Colo.: NCHEMS, 1979]).

4. Robert L. Husband, "Significant Others: A New Look at Attrition" (Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Association for Innovation in Higher Education, Philadelphia, February 7, 1976).

5. Edward C. Anderson, "Major Themes in Coordinating Successful Retention Programs for Low-Income and Minority College Students" (Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Association of Collegiate Registrars and Admissions Officers, Washington, D.C., April 1976).

6. Pat DiFede and Larcelcus Edwards, Jr., "Minority Retention: Innovative Programs — The Broward Community College/Broward Manpower Council Work Experience Program" (Paper presented at the Annual Convention of the National Association of Student Personnel Administrators, Dallas, March 1976).

The Policy Analysis Service publishes occasional papers on federal and institutional public policy issues. Recent topics include federal student aid packages, mandatory retirement implications, and enrollment trends. An annotated bibliography of reports is currently available upon request. Inquiries: call toll free (800) 424-8082 or write to Cathy Henderson, Research Associate.

AMERICAN COUNCIL ON EDUCATION
One Dupont Circle
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AMERICAN COUNCIL ON EDUCATION Policy Brief

Cathy Henderson, Research Associate December 1980

RETENTION IMPROVEMENT
Selected Case Studies*

Introduction For the past several years, many college administrators have been preoccupied with the predicted decline in the number of traditional college-age youth. They fear that, as the post-World-War-II baby boom ends, enrollments will taper off and then steadily decline throughout the next fifteen years. Consequently, colleges are marketing their services to a broad segment of the population: programs for retired citizens, women re-entering the labor market, and individuals seeking retraining for mid-career changes are commonplace. But in their search for students to fill classroom seats, college administrators too often overlook an obvious pool: those students who are currently enrolled in their institutions.

The magnitude of the attrition phenomenon is frequently underestimated. Using one standard measure of degree completion rates, the progress of ten entering freshmen can be summarized as follows:

- four will graduate from that institution within four years,
- one will remain and graduate after the initial four years,
- two will transfer and graduate,
- two will transfer and not graduate, and
- one will drop out and not re-enroll at any school.

This definition of retention—tracking the progress from entry to degree completion—is still applicable to many students, particularly those starting college immediately after high school and enrolling on a full-time basis. However, for other types of students the measurement of attrition—or the evidence of interrupting one's studies—is closely tied to the intended goals of the individual students. Consequently, many combinations of enrollment/employment/leisure are emerging as socially acceptable patterns. Moreover, it is important to remember that in many cases, leaving college, either temporarily or permanently, is the proper choice for some students. Health problems or family responsibilities may demand the student's immediate attention, or educational goals may be met before receiving a degree.

Institutional studies of retention rates can serve as important tools in developing an enrollment strategy. Emphasis on marketing techniques may have been adequate to insure a stable supply of applicants during the seventies when the pool of recent high school graduates was still increasing, but a campuswide approach to improve both marketing and retention strategies while preserving academic quality will be required in the eighties.

One can begin a retention survey at almost any time and by polling almost any group of students. But if college officials are serious about determining what is currently contributing to their retention patterns, a comprehensive approach is advisable. From surveying the following groups, administrators can begin to piece together what is working in their favor and what areas need improvement:

- persons who are accepted but never enroll,
- students who drop out early in their freshman year,
- students who leave later in their freshman year,
- sophomores who leave toward the end of their second year,
- upperclassmen who have remained enrolled,
- students who have transferred in or out,
- students who have stopped out and later re-enrolled, and
- recent graduates.

It is obviously not necessary to poll all these individuals at once, and sample surveys are usually sufficient. Following up an entering class of students several times over a period of years can reveal patterns of stopping out versus

*This paper uses some material previously presented by Janet P. Jackley and Cathy Henderson in *Retention: Tactic for the Eighties*, published by the American Council on Education, December 1979.

dropping out that can only be adequately measured through longitudinal analysis. From a series of surveys such as those suggested, administrators will be able to distinguish between students who have left for academic reasons and those whose departure may be largely determined by non-academic considerations. Knowing the difference between these two types of withdrawals will help to establish realistic goals for improving retention rates for different groups of students.

Retention Tactics. From a cross section of institutional case studies, several plans which presently are working on diverse campuses include:

1. more thoughtful initial placements of freshmen roommates through the use of student preference questionnaires. This procedure is then followed by more leniency in permitting roommate changes during the first weeks of class.
2. a rolling orientation program for freshmen during the summer prior to enrollment. This has worked particularly well for large institutions and has permitted groups of 50–100 students to become acquainted with each other and the institution even though there may be several thousand in the entering class.
3. a program to encourage students who are considering leaving temporarily to develop a structured leave of absence combining their immediate goal with the prospect of receiving academic credit for an independent project undertaken while off-campus.
4. if possible, residence in a dormitory during the initial year to improve the chances of remaining enrolled at the institution.
5. early involvement in campus activities during the freshman year. Part-time employment (up to 20 hours per week), particularly through the College Work-Study program, apparently improves retention rates. However, working more than that amount appears to be negatively correlated with remaining enrolled full-time.
6. cooperative education programs where students alternate periods of classes with employment and internships to increase satisfaction among students who are hoping to graduate with more than just theoretical knowledge.
7. easy access to and clear descriptions of sources of financial aid available from federal, state, institutional, and private sources to help meet expected expenses. From the campus publications, a student must easily be able to translate from the institution's "sticker price" down to the "net price" for tuition, fees, and other reasonable student charges.
8. honors classes for the top 10 percent of the freshman class to recognize and encourage scholarship.
9. analysis of attrition rates by departmental level. Often attrition can appear quite low among all undergraduates when students in a handful of majors may be experiencing difficulty.
10. efforts to better publicize on-campus jobs to commuter students as well as residential students.
11. expanded access to lockers for commuter students allowing them to store more than books and therefore encouraging them to use the athletic facilities. Some residential campuses have set aside a few dormitory rooms which can be rented out by commuters who might prefer to stay overnight while preparing for exams or working on a group project.
12. an emergency vehicle to be used to combat locked cars, dead batteries, flat tires, or other aggravations which typically surface after a 10:00 p.m. class.

Case Studies. For specific reference to a variety of retention case studies, the following descriptions and list of resource persons are included:

A. Elizabeth Nathans
Dean of Freshmen
Trinity College of Arts and Sciences
Duke University
Durham, North Carolina 27706

Duke developed a special counseling program, based on past experience, for four categories of freshmen students: those with poor academic qualifications, students with exceptionally high records of academic achievement, low-income students, and those enrolled from the west coast. For very different reasons, administrators expected that some of these students would need counseling during the first months of school. For example, experience had shown that students with poor academic preparation might be initially unable to compete with their peers. Many exceptionally talented students had been rejected by an Ivy League school and had enrolled at Duke as a second choice. Consequently, many pushed themselves to establish an outstanding record their first semester in the hope of transferring out. Low-income students were frequently torn between an obligation to contribute financially to family expenses back home and a commitment to stay enrolled full-time at Duke. Finally, freshmen from the west coast exhibited more evidence of homesickness than other students. This freshman counseling program has caused a reduction in Duke's already low dropout rate and also significantly reduced the transfer rate.

B. H. Kent Weldon
Director of Special Studies
Commission for Higher Education
143 West Market Street
Indianapolis, Indiana 46204

Indiana University at Bloomington conducted a longitudinal analysis of a freshman class to determine patterns of leaving. Because they had originally collected student characteristic data of entering freshmen, analysts were

also able to develop a profile of dropouts vs. persisters. The study revealed two types of withdrawals: students who left during their initial year primarily for academic reasons, and those who departed typically near the end of their second year for personal or other non-academic reasons. These non-academic withdrawals were more frequent among out-of-state women with higher-than-average GPAs. As a result of this study, a follow-up questionnaire directed to the non-academic leavers was planned with the hope of encouraging them to re-enroll at Indiana University.

C. Michael P. Riccards
Dean
College of Arts and Sciences
University of Massachusetts at Boston
Harbor Campus
Boston, Massachusetts 02125

A Committee on Attrition submitted a report in 1979 after having tracked the retention rates of entering freshmen students who persisted until graduation four years later. The Committee proposed expanding use of the College Work-Study program in order to help freshmen earn money while simultaneously becoming involved in on-campus activities. This was seen as particularly important because most students of the University of Massachusetts at Boston commute to classes. The Committee also recommended improved advising with particular attention to the selection of a major. Many students reported that they had left because they were confused about how to pursue a chosen field of study.

D. Thomas M. Freeman
Director
Office of Institutional Research
Michigan State University
East Lansing, Michigan 48824

From a 1973 survey, officials discovered that many apparent "dropouts" had actually transferred to another public institution within the state or intended to re-enroll shortly. Common complaints at that time also included the lack of adequate financial aid, scheduling problems with evening classes, and inadequate housing arrangements. From a similar recent survey, officials found that lack of financial aid was no longer cited as a major obstacle,[1] more part-time jobs were available, and scheduling and housing were no longer listed as major complaints. However, the survey revealed that, compared to the early 1970s, the quality of health care services and low-cost transportation had substantially deteriorated. Unlike more complex problems associated with academic dismissals, these last two complaints can be addressed more easily by the administration to lower the attrition rates.

E. Kay A. Dey
Director
Institutional Research
Fort Hays State University
Hays, Kansas 67601

Although some retention efforts are directed at special subgroups of students such as first semester freshmen, women, minorities, or low-achievers, Fort Hays State University proposed a plan to help a wide cross section of undergraduates. Following a survey of students who had recently left, college officials decided to contact all students who apparently had dropped out. These contacts were scheduled to be made annually or until it became clear that the person was not interested in re-enrolling. In addition, the former student would receive regular campus newsletters for at least two years after leaving.

F. David Reynard
Office of Institutional Research
Delaware State College
Dover, Delaware 19901

Since 1977 Delaware State has been using predictive tests to help identify potential freshmen dropouts. Those scoring in the bottom half of the tests are designated as a "target group" and receive personal and career counseling throughout their first year. In addition, all freshmen are required to take a one credit orientation course (usually in the fall semester) to become acclimated to the campus and its programs. The goal of these efforts to reduce attrition by 20 per cent apparently has been met. Title III funds were instrumental in developing and continuing these activities.

G. Frances A. Davis
Instructional and Staff Development Specialist
Mercer County Community College
P.O. Box B
Trenton, New Jersey 08690

With the cooperation of administrators, faculty, and students, Mercer County Community College held a week-long series of discussions to identify institutional problems which were contributing to unnecessary attrition. Four suggestions to help commuter students meet their educational goals included:

1. encouraging faculty members to use the students' names frequently during classes.
2. an early scheduling of library orientation sessions.
3. the assignment of high-risk students to the most skillful advisors.
4. use of a recruited senior citizen volunteer committee to serve as emeritus faculty for tutoring.

H. The last case study will remain anonymous. This college has implemented some good ideas to improve their retention rates. They initiated a mentor program to train faculty in advising techniques; expanded a skill laboratory to assist more "average" students who were having trouble; began a program to recruit better qualified minority students; expanded the freshman orientation session, following a survey of recent graduates; and encouraged

[1] Since 1973 federal need-based student aid programs have greatly expanded, particularly the Pell Grants program.

local residents to enroll part-time in an evening program. Yet, despite these efforts, the freshman-to-senior attrition rate improved only from 70 per cent to 60 per cent. During the past ten years, the college has evolved from a small residential private four-year institution to a branch of the public four-year state college system. Yet, college officials do not attribute their retention problems to this change in organization and mission. Even as a small residential campus, this college experienced unusually high attrition. Students who left frequently described the college as a "stepping stone" to securing a better job, enrolling in another school, or fulfilling personal goals. Evidently, this image problem persists and consequently attempts to improve retention are only marginally successful. The last report received from this college indicated that the top administrator was to be replaced; perhaps the retention rate will improve under new guidance.

Summary From these case studies and through a network of campus researchers, practitioners can learn techniques to improve retention either in the traditional sense of degree-completion rates or at least to reduce unnecessary attrition caused by misinformation or confusion. Not all strategies will work; but, for example, ideas originally developed at a small residential setting could be useful to a single school or department within a large university. Similarly, administrators at colleges with a growing commuter clientele should discuss their common concerns with knowledgeable community college staff. With increased attention being placed on marketing tactics to attract a stable student body during the next decade, college administrators should also strive to help students identify and achieve their educational goals once they are enrolled. A total planning effort to improve both marketing and retention is a campuswide responsibility with roles for administrators, faculty, and students to perform.

The Division of Policy Analysis and Research publishes occasional papers on federal public policy and institutional management issues. Recent topics include the financial condition of colleges and universities, student aid packages, demographic and enrollment trends, community college finances, retention case studies, college refund policies, and current tenure practices.

An annotated bibliography of reports is available upon request. Contact Cathy Henderson, Research Associate, American Council on Education, One Dupont Circle, N.W., Washington, D.C. 20036.

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